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A world of their making: an evaluation of the constructivist critique in International Relations

RONEN PALAN¹

Abstract. IR constructivism maintain that a proper understanding of the way subjects interact with the world and with each other alerts us to the fallacy of conventional IR theory. And yet, for a theory that is so obviously dependent upon a rigorous working of the relationship between social theory and its IR variant, it is curious that, with one or two exceptions, IR constructivists often advance incompatible theories. I argue that the confused manner by which, in particular, ‘soft’ constructivism relates to social theory is not accidental but a necessary component of a theory that asserts, but never proves, the primacy of norms and laws over material considerations, in domestic and international politics.

Introduction

There are few branches of the social sciences that have displayed the same degree of fascination with the deepest and most complex philosophical controversies than International Relations. Indeed, over the past few decades IR as a discipline appears to have been especially sensitive to larger methodological issues.² The results however have not always been particularly encouraging. Thus, in the 1930s, a group of thinkers who contemplated the foundations of a cooperative international system were lumped together by someone of the standing of E.H. Carr and labelled ‘idealists’—even though Carr, one assumes, knew full well that IR idealists had little in common with the idealist philosophical tradition of Hegel, Cassirer and the like.³ Hans Morgenthau was later dubbed, and subsequently attacked for being, a realist, notwithstanding the fact that his own theory of ‘political realism’ was a literal translation of Treitschke’s ‘realpolitik’,⁴ which owes more to idealist philosophy than the so-called International Relations idealists.⁵ Similarly, Kenneth Waltz’s ‘structuralism’ shares little in common with Levi-Strauss’s ‘structuralism’, while it is

¹ In writing this article I have benefited from the advice, comments and discussions with Todd Always, Libby Assassi, Gary Burn, Mick Cox, Friedrich Kratochwil and two anonymous referees. Needless to say, none of them bear any responsibility for the ideas presented in this article.

² Nicholas G. Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (University of South California Press, 1989).

³ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989).

⁴ See: Heinrich von Treitschke, *Politics* (London: Constable, 1916). For an excellent discussion of Treitschke’s theory of Realpolitik, see K.H. Metz, ‘The Politics of Conflict: Heinrich von Treitschke and the Idea of Realpolitik’, *History of Political Thought*, 3:1 (Spring 1982).

⁵ See Ronen Palan and Blair Brook, ‘On the Idealist Origins of the Realist Theory of International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 1993, pp. 385–99; Zbigniew Pelczynski, ‘Hegel and International History’, in Philip Windsor (ed.), *Reason and History: or Only a History of Reason* (Leicester and London: Leicester University Press, 1990).

difficult to discern the extent to which what is often described as 'post-structuralism' in International Relations, is a break with the tradition of thought that spans back to De Saussure and Levi-Strauss.

These preliminary comments should serve as a timely warning when it comes to evaluating one of the more recent and more successful 'fads' in IR: namely 'constructivism'. For just as realism, idealism, structuralism or post-structuralism are quite distinct, and often spectacularly so, from their International Relations derivatives, so it is with constructivism too. Constructivism, or as Ruggie calls it, 'social constructivism' is an incredibly broad movement encompassing, among other schools of thought, Weberian interpretative sociology, Symbolic Interactionism, variants of Marxism, Veblenian institutionalism, post-structuralism(s) and hermeneutics.⁶ Wendt points out, however, that IR constructivism draws selectively from social theory and is characterized more specifically by its 'idealism'. By idealism Wendt means (1) that structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces;⁷ and (2) identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature.⁸ It is common now to make a distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' versions of IR constructivism. Hard constructivists like Onuf, Koslowski and Kratochwil believe that social institutions and structures are *nothing* but 'artifice of man-made institutions',⁹ and maintain 'both the international system and the state in terms of *normatively constituted practices*'.¹⁰ Soft constructivists are an eclectic lot consisting of practically anyone who shows interest in culture, identity, norms and accept the notion that 'actors' interests are not fixed but change and arise out of a social context.¹¹

A legitimate, if not too illuminating critique of IR constructivism would simply be to say that constructivists are empirically and methodologically wrong: that in the last analysis 'ideas' are not the principal force of order and change in the international system; that material factors and material interests override the primacy of normatively constituted practices. We might also wonder why is it that at a time

⁶ See John G. Ruggie, 'What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 855–85; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). In fact constructivism can be equated with what Silverman calls, 'the continental tradition'. See Hugh J. Silverman, *Inscriptions: After Phenomenology and Structuralism* (Northwestern University Press, 1997); Gerard Delanty, for instance, includes under the category of constructivism, hermeneutics, the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt school, communication theory, deconstruction and postmodernism. See Gerard Delanty, *Social Science: Beyond Constructivism and Realism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997). This view also seems to have been adopted by Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, 'Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:3 (1998), pp. 259–94.

⁷ Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 1. See also Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Norm, Identity, and Culture in National Security', in Peter Katzenstein, (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Martha Finnemore, 'Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention', in the same volume.

⁸ Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 1.

⁹ Ray Koslowski and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, 'Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet Empire's Demise and the International System', *International Organization*, 48:2 (1994), pp. 215–47, esp. p. 222.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹¹ See, for instance, Price and Reus-Smit, 'Dangerous Liaisons?' Wendt now counts members of the English school and many prominent foreign policy authors among the list of IR constructivists.

when social theory is making a concerted attempt at transcending the false dichotomy between materialism and idealism,¹² IR constructivism is retreating into idealism? But while these are legitimate concerns, they either fail to deal with constructivism on its own terms or explore the potential contribution of constructivism to international relations. In this article I attempt to do precisely that; to evaluate IR constructivism as a serious, albeit flawed, attempt at generating an alternative theory of international order and change.

IR constructivism borrows from social theory in order to argue that a proper understanding of the way subjects interact with the world and with each other alerts us to the fallacy of conventional IR theory. And yet, as Wendt notes, constructivism is a counter-intuitive theory.¹³ IR constructivists cannot appeal therefore to some notion of 'commonsense' (presented erroneously by realists as the philosophy of 'scientific realism') to back up their argument but advance what amounts to a theoretical argument based on their reading of social theory. It is, of course, one thing to begin from the premise that ideas and norms are the principal agent of change; it is an entirely different proposition to demonstrate the inherent necessity of this to be the case, and in addition outline the specific form by which the 'construction' of the international environment, on its opportunities and constraints, takes place. And yet, for a theory that is so obviously dependent upon a rigorous working of the relationship between social theory and its IR variant, it is curious that, with one or two exceptions, IR constructivists often advance positions that conventionally are viewed as either incompatible or at least highly debatable. It is not appreciated enough, for instance, that IR constructivists draw on a number of different, and often incompatible, social theories. For example, Wendt acknowledges his debt to Symbolic Interactionism, while Onuf borrows primarily from Wittgenstein whose theories evolve in part in repudiation of Symbolic Interactionism. Wendt like Ruggie takes the view that constructivism opposes the 'individualist' view, and yet Symbolic Interactionism and Weberian interpretative sociology are both variants of methodological individualism.

Such apparent contradictions are not necessarily a problem, but they need to be debated if IR constructivists were to demonstrate how they could be resolved—which unfortunately, with one or two exceptions, they do not. The problem is compounded because by glossing over these important debates and controversies, IR constructivists have, by and large, been inattentive to the considerable difficulties that lie in converting those sociological theories that are centred on theories of the Self to international relations. These seemingly pedantic and highly theoretical matters are not insignificant, particularly in the context of other emerging characteristics of IR constructivism. For while Ruggie correctly contrasts IR constructivism with neo-utilitarianism or what James Bernard Murphy calls 'social physics',¹⁴ the more common view is the one advanced by Wendt, who labels Kenneth Waltz's neorealism an individualist and materialist theory and contrasts it

¹² For discussion see: Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); and Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* (London: Tavistock, 1972).

¹³ Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Ruggie, 'What Makes the World Hang Together'? Ruggie clearly draws on James Bernard Murphy 'Rational Choice Theory as Social Physics', in Jeffrey Friedman (ed.), *The Rational Choice Controversy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

with the idealist, structuralist and holistic 'constructivist' theory of his own. But this highly dubious set of dichotomies serve merely to blunt the social critique of realism, let alone Marxism and poststructuralism, and represent human and state behaviour as a 'battle of ideas.' So for example in the hands of Alexander Wendt constructivism is associated with the 'norms and law [that he alleges] govern most domestic politics' while 'materialism' is associated with 'self-interest and coercion [that] seems to rule international politics'.¹⁵ The distinction between constructivism and materialism then becomes a dichotomy between the politics of norms and law, on the one hand, and the politics of self-help and coercion, on the other. Constructivist idealism then becomes an assertion about the primacy of norms and laws in both domestic and international politics. So that, to paraphrase Wendt, the superstructure indeed is able to counter the material base of power. The result is that in the name of social theory, Wendt manages to remove traces of 'materialist' interest from the analysis of international order.

The argument in this article is that the confused manner by which 'soft' constructivism relates to social theory is not accidental but a necessary component of a theory whose goal is to advance such a strong normative and indeed ideological perspective. Curiously, the more robust and rigorous theories of Onuf and Kratochwil end up making similar normative assertions. The route is very different, but the outcome is the same. Due to the great diversity and richness of IR constructivism it is impossible to examine in detail each and every one of them. I will concentrate therefore on few exemplary cases.

Constructivism in the social sciences

Constructivism is not a well-defined sociological approach. Terms such as constructivism, constructionism, and constitutiveness are frequently used in different branches of the social sciences and are, unfortunately, used by different people to describe different things. To complicate matters further, the branch of constructivism that has made the deepest impact in IR draws primarily on a position which has developed as an extension of 'Chicago style' symbolic interactionist methodology (or latterly known better as ethnographic research), and only some of its adherents describe themselves as constructivists or constructionists.¹⁶

The term 'constructivism' was coined in the early 1920s by a group of Soviet artists and architects to describe a new artistic movement. Today, however, constructivism is most commonly used to describe an epistemological position that bears little resemblance to Soviet constructivism. Drawing inspiration from Immanuel Kant's theory of synthetic knowledge, constructivist epistemology maintains that what is known cannot be the result of a passive receiving, but the product

¹⁵ Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Key texts include: Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969); George H. Mead, 'Mind, Self and Society', in Charles W. Morris (ed.) (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1934); Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Northwestern University Press, 1967). For good overviews of symbolic interactionism, see Joel M. Charon, *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction, an Interpretation, an Integration*, 6th edn. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

of an active subject's activity.¹⁷ In this view, we do not apprehend the external world 'as it is,' but our biological and psychic properties determine our knowledge of the world. Constructivists do not deny external or objective reality; they deny the orthodox supposition of a 'natural connection between word and thing and a further natural connection between the symbol and the thing symbolized'.¹⁸

Prior to Kant, the generally accepted idea was that objects of knowledge were known and the given, consequently, to paraphrase Cassirer, methodologically the road leads solely from 'data' to 'laws'.¹⁹ Echoes of such views are found, for instance, in Hans Morgenthau, who, confusingly, on the one hand prioritizes the concept of interest, but in the same breadth also claims to draw conclusions from raw data. In his words: '[w]e look over his [the statesman's] shoulder when he writes his dispatches; we listen in on conversation with other statesmen; we read and anticipate his very thoughts. Thinking in terms of interest defined as power'.²⁰ Theories that treat data in such a manner are viewed in IR as 'realist'. Kant brought about a revolution in methodology arguing that instead of starting from the object as known we must begin with the laws of cognition, which alone are accessible to us. Implicit in this is an idealist position, namely, that the 'object of knowledge can be defined only through the medium of a particular logical and conceptual structure'.²¹

Cassirer depicts idealism (or epistemological constructivism) as a philosophical tradition that emerged in the realization that language and thought does not play a neutral role in knowledge acquisition. Cassirer stresses the 'particularity' of logical and conceptual structures, primarily associated with the structure of language and the unconscious. To understand this idea better it is worth quoting Cassirer at some length:

'what the physicist seeks in phenomena is a statement of their necessary connection. But in order to arrive at this statement, he must not only leave behind him the immediate world of sensory impressions, but must seemingly turn away from them entirely. The concepts with which he operates, the concepts of space and time, of mass and force, or material and energy, of the atom or the ether, are free 'fictions'. Cognition devises them in order to dominate the world of sensory experience and survey it as a world order by law, but nothing in the sensory data themselves immediately corresponds to them, yet although there is no such correspondence—and perhaps precisely because there is none—the conceptual world of physics is entirely self-contained. Each particular concept, each special fiction and sign is like the articulated word of a language meaningful in itself and ordered according to fixed rules.'²²

The realm of meaningful statements is structurally separated from the realm of what Lacan called 'the real'. Perception and representation are two different things. As Hegel notes: 'All that I can express by language is a universal; even if I say "this thing here" I am still expressing it by an abstraction, and I cannot attain the "thing-

¹⁷ Ernst Glaserfeld, 'An introduction to radical constructivism', in Paul Watzlawick (ed.), *The Invented Reality: How Do We Know What We Believe We Know? Contributions to Constructivism* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1984), p. 31.

¹⁸ Wilden, *System and Structure*, p. 31.

¹⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1 (Yale and London: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 74.

²⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 4th edn. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 5.

²¹ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, p. 76.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

itself” in speaking of it’.²³ In other words, the commonsense perception of the ‘subject’ existing outside or prior to language is only an analogy derived from language.

The implication of this view is that the sign ‘is no mere accidental cloak to the idea, but its necessary and essential organ’.²⁴ As a result, argues Cassirer, social science is in fact a ‘cultural’ science, an idea echoed by the IR constructivists. But according to Cassirer, such science requires, ‘a kind of grammar of the symbolic function’.²⁵ Hence the strong affinity between constructivism and the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy. The question of language, language formation and cognition is therefore at the heart of constructivist approaches.

In Sociology, however, constructivism is often used more narrowly to describe ‘subjectivist’, methodological individualist sociological approaches that tend to focus on social interaction between individuals. For example, Wacquant describes ‘[t]he subjectivist or ‘constructivist’ point of view ... [that] asserts that social reality is a ‘contingent ongoing accomplishment’ of competent social actors who continually construct their social world via ‘the organized artful practices of everyday life’.²⁶ Such subjectivist theories are associated with Symbolic Interactionism and more recently with the work of Irving Goffman. Otherwise the label is used more loosely to describe those approaches that broadly resonate with any one of the above ‘constructivist’ epistemological positions. Constructivism then becomes a form of historicism in that it rejects the idea of some timeless structures or transhistorical patterns of human behaviour.

Constructivists of different hues and traditions agree on a fundamental point, that ‘humans see the world through perspectives, developed socially ... [meaning] reality is social, and what we see ‘out there’ (and within ourselves) is developed in interaction with others’.²⁷ However, from this shared broad standpoint three distinct constructivist positions have emerged.

Constructivism and subjectivism

The tradition of constructivism that has made the greatest impact in IR is the one associated with the phenomenology and sociological approaches, such as Symbolic Interactionism and ethnographic methodologies that focus on human behaviour and social interaction. These approaches, although divergent, centre on human interaction as the unit of analysis. Symbolic Interactionism is premised on the theory that humans see the world through perspectives that are developed socially. ‘Reality’ therefore is social in the sense that what we see ‘out there’ and even in ourselves is developed in interaction with others.²⁸ Symbolic interactionists accept that objects

²³ Anthony Wilden, *Lacan and the Discourse of the Other: Introduction to Jacques Lacan, The Function of the Self: The Formation of Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. 194.

²⁴ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, p. 86.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁶ J.D. Loic Wacquant, ‘The Purpose of Reflexive Sociology’, in Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 9.

²⁷ Charon, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 42.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

may exist in physical form—in that sense Wendt, who largely follows Mead and Blumer (without enquiring into some important differences between them), is correct in saying that ‘constructivists’ do not deny ‘external reality’, but point out that objects (‘brute material forces’ in Wendt’s rendering) are always interpreted and given meaning. Physical objects are, to all intent and purposes, ‘social objects’.²⁹ Consequently, ‘humans act within a world of social objects. That is, we act not toward a world out there but rather toward a world defined by others through symbolic communication’.³⁰

Symbolic Interactionism rejects the image of a passive, structurally determined subject of structuralism and views people as constantly undergoing changes during interaction. The subject is conceptualized therefore as an actor and we are the objects of our own actions.³¹ But in contrast to Wendt’s interpretation, for symbolic interactionists, ideas or attitudes or values are not as important as the active ongoing process of thinking.³² In other words, ideas and norms, the two central concepts of IR constructivists, are not as significant as pragmatic truths. It is also important to note that this branch of constructivism is generally viewed as advancing a ‘subjectivist’, methodological individualist point of view,³³ hence it is a puzzle why Wendt rejects methodological individualism.

Symbolic interactionism made quite an impact on politics, particularly on the first Roosevelt administration.³⁴ One may use symbolic interactionism techniques to analyse the emergence of ‘epistemic communities’, but as we will see, it is far more difficult to use symbolic interactionist methodology in the study of the relationship between states.

Constructivism and language-game

Symbolic Interactionism is founded on a psychological theory of the self. That is why at the heart of the transference of this theory to international relations is the idea that states do possess a ‘Self’ that behaves in ways not dissimilar to individuals in the social setting.³⁵ A second variant of constructivism, the one favoured by Nicholas Onuf, is not founded upon a theory of the Self but takes its cue from Emile Durkheim and asks what are the causes of the enduring patterns of behaviour and social structures of this ‘constructed’ social reality? The answer is provided by a key sociological concept, that is the concept of social institutions. Social institutions are those external realities associated with the biological metaphor of ‘structures’,³⁶

²⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

³¹ ‘The self is an object of the actor’s own action. The individual acts towards others: the individual also acts towards himself or herself. It is not the self that acts: it is the actor that acts’. Ibid., p. 72.

³² Ibid., p. 27.

³³ Wacquant describes symbolic interactionism as ‘[t]he subjectivist or ‘constructivist’ point of view ... [which] ‘asserts that social reality is a ‘contingent ongoing accomplishment’ of competent social actors who continually construct their social world via ‘the organized artful practices of everyday life.’ Wacquant, *The Purpose of Reflexive Sociology*, p. 9.

³⁴ See Dario Melossi, *The State of Social Control: A Sociological Study of Concepts of State and Social Control in the Making of Democrac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), ch. 7.

³⁵ See ‘The problem of corporate agency’, Wendt, *Social Theory*.

³⁶ See, for instance, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (London: Cohen & West, 1952).

but unlike cruder theories of social structures that negate agency, constructivists stress that social institutions are themselves products of human agency, there is, as Marc Tool notes 'no other credible source'.³⁷

What then are social institutions? An interpreter of Wittgenstein's work, David Bloor, argues that a social institution 'is a collective pattern of self-referring activity'.³⁸ Bloor provides the examples of coins, property and marriage to demonstrate that institutions have no existence outside a discourse.³⁹ According to this theory 'social objects' are constituted by the description actors and participants give it; they have no existence independent of their beliefs and utterances about them and cannot be described 'more closely' by, as it were, getting behind these descriptions'.⁴⁰ The crude materialist concept of reality (or Wendt's 'brute material forces') is a hypothetical referent point emergent out of the properties of language.

While this last statement appears broadly similar to the approach taken by subjectivist theorists, in fact it is not. To get to the bottom of the difference between them, we need to dwell briefly on an important debate about the nature of language and 'meaning' which, in addition to the differences with regard to theories of Self, is at the heart of the distinction between, say, Wendt's (mostly) symbolic interactionist constructivism and Onuf's (mostly) Wittgenstenian constructivism. Constructivism, as we saw above, rejects the image theory of language, i.e. the idea that words call up some image or picture in our minds. The subject then plays an active role in the construction of its own truth. The rejection of the image theory then provides the epistemological foundations upon which constructivists reject the primacy of what Wendt calls 'brute material forces'. Constructivists are left, however, with two different interpretations of the 'meaning of meaning'. The first, phenomenological, is the theory of image as a mental act which accordingly interprets a word or sign as having meaning because it is accompanied by a mental act. Consequently, the symbol is 'meant' in a certain way, and its correct application is governed by an 'intention'.⁴¹ The implication of this theory, as Alfred Schutz (an important contributor to Symbolic Interactionism) says, is that 'intended meaning is essentially subjective'. Our concept of reality is therefore 'intersubjective,' constituted as it were, as an amalgam of the subjective meanings individuals attribute to it.

In a brilliant exposition, David Bloor demonstrates that this position ('intentional sociology' as Wendt calls it) is individualistic to the extent that it claims that 'grasping a concept is a purely individual achievement. It is an individual mental act'.⁴² The dominant school of IR constructivism places, therefore, the emphasis upon the individual, or more problematically, the state, which through an act of

³⁷ M. Tool, 'Institutional Adjustment and Instrumental Value', *Review of International Political Economy*, 1:3 (1994).

³⁸ David Bloor, *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 33.

³⁹ 'If we try to state the "meaning" of that behaviour or articulate the idea that informs it, independently of the practice itself, we shall fail. Property has been defined in terms of agreement, but the agreement can itself only be defined by reference to the notion of property. The content and the object of the agreement are defined in terms of one another, and so we are going round in circles ... this logical circle derives from the fact that the whole discourse, the whole language game of calling something "property", is a self-referring practice. In virtue of it being a self-referring practice it is also a self-creating practice', Bloor, *Wittgenstein: Rules*, p. 31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴¹ David Bloor, *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 8.

⁴² Bloor, *Wittgenstein: Rules*, p. 5.

interpretation 'constructs' the 'meaning' in its action. So, to use Alexander Wendt's apt, but ultimately misleading metaphor, 'anarchy is what states make of it'.⁴³ In other words, anarchy in the international system is traceable to the 'individual-state' act of interpretation of its situation within the context of the system of states. Thus, to paraphrase Wacquant, the international society 'appears as the emergent product of the decisions, actions, and cognition of conscious, alert individuals [read states] to whom the world is given as immediately familiar and meaningful'.⁴⁴ This is fundamentally an individualistic approach which generates in the case of Wendt a statecentric theory of international relations.

The neorealist individualistic position is predicated on an essentialist theory of state action, namely, that states have a 'survival instinct'.⁴⁵ Such an essentialist position implies that while international structures are emergent of the properties of the individual states that make up the system, states have no control over their own fundamental properties (survival instinct) and hence the structure of the international system appears as an external force to which they need to adjust. Also for Wendt the characteristics of the international system can be traced back to state behaviour, in that sense he is a 'structuralist' as well. Wendt, however, advances inconsistent sets of theories. In one version, he seems to adopt an anti-essentialist state theory which implies the possibility of a variety of international structures. It is puzzling that, as we will see below, he also advances an essentialist state theory, a position that contradicts his symbolic interactionism.⁴⁶ In any case, contrary to his own assertions, Wendt's version of constructivism is essentially individualistic.

The other interpretation represented by Wittgenstein or, more appropriately, one influential interpretation of Wittgenstein, takes a *collectivist* view of meaning. Meaning, according to this view, resides exclusively in social patterns of use. The question then is 'why do our mental images and our acts of intention seem to be endowed with remarkable potency, as if they 'take place in a queer kind of medium'?'⁴⁷ As stated by Bloor, Wittgenstein developed his theory of condensation to deal with the question. According to this theory, the power of language is not entirely false but represents the power of society so that 'the real source of "life" in a word or sentence is provided, not by the individual mind, but by society. They are animated with meaning because of the social practices of which they are an integral part'.⁴⁸

This interpretation shifts the focus of attention of constructivism from the individual act of interpretation to the collective act of rule formation or language game, which is the subject of Onuf's constructivism. This variant of constructivism is, indeed, non-individualistic. In Onuf's constructivism, assertions such as 'anarchy is what states make of it' are meaningless or trite because social organizations like

⁴³ Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425.

⁴⁴ Wacquant, *Reflexive Sociology*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

⁴⁶ We can see now how easily this position can fall into voluntarism. If we assume that an abstracted whole, society, is ultimately a product of individual subjective understandings of the whole, then the task of 'responsible' and 'progressive' social theorists becomes that of encouraging 'emancipatory language' which then, in its interaction with other subjective meanings, engineers positive changes in reality 'out there'. It is a form of positive thinking predicated upon naive methodological individualistic assumptions.

⁴⁷ Bloor, *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory*, p. 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

states do not 'produce' meaning. Indeed, Onuf is quite clear on the matter, states cannot serve as units of analysis from a constructivist perspective, since they themselves are nothing but social organizations or, as Onuf argues, they are the problem that needs explaining, not a source for explanation. The problem of anarchy, therefore, needs to be investigated within the context of theory and not confused with the daily interaction of states.

Lacanian constructivism

This, somewhat esoteric, tension in constructivist-inspired thought between individualistic and collectivist theories has generated very different variants in IR who share so little to the extent that I am doubtful whether the appellation constructivism is not misleading. But that is not all: there is another tension between those who wish to maintain a more limited inquiry into rules and rule formation, and the broader and deeper critique of culture which emerged as a general paradigm in the social sciences called the critical tradition or the continental tradition in philosophy.⁴⁹ The two are related in many ways, and we need subtle reading to understand some crucial differences between them.

Undoubtedly one of the more powerful and rigorous critiques of conventional theories of knowledge, still the implication of Wittgenstein's theories for social theory remain unclear. Wittgenstein appears to believe that the individual is trained or 'socialized' into prevailing social conventions, but he does not provide an answer as to how processes of socialization take place. The field is left therefore to the two remaining constructivist positions: Symbolic Interactionism which appears to empower the sovereign individual, and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, which portrays socialization as a human drama—a painful process of insertion in the Imaginary and the Symbolic which Foucault calls 'normalization'.

Bloor in fact reads Wittgenstein as someone close to De Saussure's structuralism, no doubt a controversial interpretation which is important to our case here because of the strong if tacit (linguistic) structuralist underpinnings of Onuf's thought.⁵⁰ The father of modern structuralism, Ferdinand De Saussure had stressed the purely relational nature of the linguistic system; according to De Saussure signs do not pre-exist the relation between them but themselves are the effects of the play of difference.⁵¹ Meaning then is emergent in the play of difference between words and is located in the very structure of language. Jacques Derrida has demonstrated the inconsistencies of De Saussure's theory which, on the one hand, advances a purely structuralist theory of meaning, but on the other hand recognizes that the sign exists to communicate events 'out there'. Structuralism contains therefore a silent assumption about some original meaning which Derrida identified with 'logocentric

⁴⁹ Silverman, *Inscriptions*.

⁵⁰ Whether Nicolas Onuf advances a De Saussurian interpretation or a behavioural structuralist linguistic interpretation à la Bloomfield is not entirely clear. As will be demonstrated below, his approach is essentially structuralist.

⁵¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Courses in General Linguistics* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1959).

metaphysics'.⁵² Derrida's critique is important because he demonstrates that a purely structuralist theory, in which meaning is emergent of the properties of language as in the case of De Saussure, or of theory as in the case of Onuf, is grounded in silent assumptions. As we will see below, Onuf's reconstruction of IR theory is based on a tacit appeal to our knowledge of the 'real world' which is never made explicit.

A third 'constructivist' school, post-structuralism, is closer to Wittgenstein's theory of language, but advances a distinct theory of the Self. Here the Self is not confused with the more mundane problem of role identity (I am a 'father', 'teacher' and so on). The Self is not an ever-changing form of identity, but a historically constructed ego. Lacan argues that Freud established the falsity of psychologism (in the mode of symbolic interactionism) in the study of the psyche.⁵³ In the words of Soper 'what Freud shows is that an individual is not born human but only becomes so through incorporation into a cultural order. Hence psychology's true subject is not the 'nature' of an (already) human mind, but its 'becoming-human'.⁵⁴ To use Lacanian language, there are those who view the subject as embedded in the Imaginary order (which confusingly is the symbolic order of Symbolic Interactionism). Lacanians maintain, however, an important distinction between three orders: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic.⁵⁵ For Lacanians communication takes many forms, including, touch, sound, unwitting symbolic exchange and so on, and the construction of the Self in the child is, on the one hand, the reduction of these many forms and the privileging, as other versions of constructivism maintain, of language (or the Imaginary), but at the same time, much of this accumulated 'knowledge' is not lost but has become repressed. Whereas symbolic Interactionism and Wittgenstein-inspired social philosophy places the emphasis on the Imaginary order, Lacanian Marxism add an important adjunct that 'meaning is produced as language is driven or operated by subject-functions such as desire, temporality, repression, the Imaginary'.⁵⁶ The theory of the Symbolic allows some Lacanian Marxists such as Deleuze and Guattari (and Foucault, if we prepared to situate him within this tradition of thought) to posit in addition to social interaction, a world of repression and transference, which prepares us for the complexities of what Bourdieu calls the 'irrationality of accumulation' and exploitation, and a theory of capitalism as desire. The latter theories are, in different ways, at the heart of the attempt to construct a unified post-structuralist theory of political economy.

The later form of constructivism locates constructivist concerns within a broad critique of society and power. It is therefore an explicitly normative tradition. The contrast with subjectivism is obvious: subjectivism never enquires about the emergence of the subject-as-actor and shies away from questions of power, justice, distribution and so on. The critical tradition accepts the second form of constructivism (Wittgensteinian) but adds an important adjunct, a referent outside the system, for

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982).

⁵³ For an excellent exposition, see Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (London: Hutchinson, 1986).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵⁵ For a good discussion, see Wilden, *Lacan and the Discourse of the Other*.

⁵⁶ Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr. 'The Subject of Discourse: Reading Lacan through (and beyond) Post-Structuralist Context', in Mark Bracher, Marshall Alcorn, Ronald Cortell and Françoise Massardier-Kenney (eds.), *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society* (New York University Press, 1973), p. 23.

systems of truth are not simply mutually referring but are systems of repression and exploitation.

To place this in the context of this discussion, although Onuf is by no means a direct follower of Wittgenstein, he seems to have accepted a structuralist interpretation of language-game theory, namely that language is complete and hence 'meaning' arises out of relationships internal to it. Transposed to the question of theory, if we assume that a theory is complete (a 'paradigm'), then theoretical change is a matter of reconfiguration of the hierarchy and relationships among concepts and consequently theory makes no referent to something 'outside' its own realm (although as Derrida notes: it always makes silent appeal to the world 'out there'), which is precisely what Onuf's 'reconstruction' of International Relations theory is all about. While in Wendt, the concept of history is simply absent, Onuf's historical analysis is conducted purely in the realm of the history of ideas. It is a history told through the spectrum of reflection now presented as the ultimate cause of history.

In contrast, the critical tradition accepts that theory need not be 'complete': indeed, it may be argued that incompleteness and theoretical inconsistencies offer endless possibilities of adaptation. The referent or 'goal' outside theory is the issue that occupies this tradition—an 'internal' critique of analytical consistency and theoretical adequacy is of no particular interest and hence Foucault or Deleuze's fascination with 'empiricism'. Unfortunately, this tradition of constructivist thought which is represented in recent trends in evolutionary economics, socio-economics, social anthropology and communication theory, so far has found few friends in International Relations and therefore I will not be discussing it at great length.⁵⁷

This brief summary is not meant as an introduction to well thought out concepts and ideas, but to alert students of IR that what appear as distant, esoteric debates between different approaches to epistemology, linguistics and psychoanalysis, have an immediate bearing upon the type and shape of international relations' theorizing.

Constructivism in IR

As we have seen, constructivism evolved within debates about the nature of the self, subjectivity, individuals' perception of reality and so on. One may intuitively sense that these debates must have an impact on International Relations scholarship but the question is how? Constructivism has made many converts in IR within a relatively short time. Not surprisingly, a number of solutions and in many cases apparent solutions, representing a plurality of constructivisms, have emerged. The plethora of constructivisms cannot be encompassed in one article, so instead I will examine three of what I take to be some of the more interesting solutions to the problem as stated above: Alexander Wendt's theory of state behaviour, Emmanuel

⁵⁷ For an excellent discussion see John Wilkinson, 'A New Paradigm for Economic Analysis?' *Economy & Society*, 26:3 (1997); Philip Mirowski, 'The Philosophical Bases of Institutional Economics', in Don Lavoie (ed.), *Economics and Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Ian Mackenzie, 'Creativity as Criticism: The Philosophical Constructivism of Deleuze and Guattari', *Radical Philosophy*, 86 (1997), pp. 7–18; and Palan, forthcoming.

Adler's notion of 'constructed' or imagined communities, and then I will turn to the more ambitious project of Nicholas Onuf.

Emmanuel Adler's theory of 'cognitive regions'

The constructivism of Emmanuel Adler, Risse-Kapen and a number of others who work in this genre, places the emphasis on the 'constructed' nature of those collective identities which are normally taken by International Relations scholars as historically given 'units of analysis'. In doing so, these constructivists appear to challenge what is normally assumed to be the 'realist' assumption about the state and demonstrate possibilities for the emergence of new forms of collective identities transcending state boundaries, stressing the role of international institutions in generating such communities.

Consequently, in contrast to what appears to be the conventional view of states, Adler, in one of his recent articles, affirms the familiar constructivist theme that 'communities are socially constructed 'cognitive regions' ... whose people imagine that, with respect to their own security and economic well-being, borders run, more or less, where shared understandings and common identities end'.⁵⁸ Instead of assuming the familiar fixed and unproblematic sense of collective identity encapsulated by the term 'state', Adler emphasizes the fluidity of the collective sense of identities that (presumably) underpin political action.

The shift from an institution to identities then opens up new ways of examining current affairs but one immediate difficulty appears when it comes to identifying the participating social agents in the construction of such 'cognitive regions'. They are, unfortunately, a rather eclectic lot: 'individuals, and more generally, the states that eventually form the community, as well as by international organisations'.⁵⁹ As a general proposition, the statement may well be factually correct, but the eclecticism of the group renders any attempt at describing the *mechanics* of social construction, the ways by which an interactionist order comes about, difficult to describe. In fact, the mechanics of the social construction of identities, how the individuals, state and international organization mesh together in an interactionist order, how, indeed, people come to 'imagine' that their own security and economic well-being runs more or less with the boundaries of the state, is not examined.⁶⁰ It will be remembered, however, that one of the supposed great influences on constructivism, Max Weber, thought that order was imposed rather than constructed through some 'imagined' common belief in shared benefits.⁶¹ This is significant because the shift from social organizations, like states, to the more amorphic 'epistemic communities' allows constructivists to represent some forms of orders as communal, voluntaristic or 'interactionist' rather than imposed. But then, the narrative shifts back to the state which is now presented as a voluntaristic interactionist association.

⁵⁸ Emanuel Adler, 'Imagined (Security) Communities: Cognitive Regions in International Relations', *Millennium*, 26:2 (1997), p. 250.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁶⁰ Adler may be relying on the theoretical position of Wendt to which I will turn shortly.

⁶¹ In his words 'an order is always "imposed" to the extent that it does not originate from a voluntary personal agreement of all the individuals concerned', Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (1978), p. 51.

Adler warns, however, that shared knowledge and understanding does not in itself constitute cognitive regions. Rather, cognitive regions emerged from 'shared practical knowledge' or, to use my own words, the *experience* of the participants. In one way, the emphasis on 'shared practical knowledge' brings us back to the pragmatic philosophy of symbolic interactionism. But the pragmatism that is brought to bear here is not a symbolic interactionist pragmatism rooted in the actors' emergent perceptions so much as an abstract, analytical pragmatism of an observer who knows better what actors should have experienced.

In fact, this form of abstract pragmatism, which runs through much of IR constructivism, raises serious doubts as to the true insight of 'constructivism'. For Adler suggests that people 'construct' an understanding of the world on the basis of their life experience of that world. In other words, while it is evident that 'experience' or 'shared practical knowledge' is mediated through 'interpretation', the stress is clearly on the 'experience' rather than on interpretation as the ultimate source of what people take to be the truth.

Indeed, it is interesting to read in this context the archtypical straw man of critical international relationship scholarship, Hans Morgenthau. If one is prepared to dig deep into Morgenthau's work, one soon enough discovers a 'constructivist' in hiding. See for instance Morgenthau's view of the state:

National societies are composed of a multiplicity of social groups. Some of these are antagonistic to each other in the sense that their respective claims are mutually exclusive. This pluralism of domestic groupings and conflicts, then, tends to impress upon the participants the relativity of their interests and loyalties and thus to mitigate the clashes of different groups. This pluralism brings about, as it were, an economy in the intensity of identification, which must be spread wide in order to give every group and conflict its share ... They partake of the same language, the same customs, the same historic recollections, the same fundamental social and political philosophy, the same national symbols.⁶²

For Morgenthau, then, the 'interactionist' nature of domestic politics generates a sense of collective identity that animates state power. One may argue that Morgenthau advances here a meta-theory (in Bateson's sense of 'nips and bites')⁶³ of political allegiance: political clashes are nips and not bites and hence help to cement a sense of communal identities.

This is of some significance not least because constructivism portrays itself as a competing theory to realism. But if Morgenthau possesses what appears to be a perfectly constructivist theory of domestic order, then why did he not follow in the footsteps of modern constructivism and accept that, at least in principle, the same sort of mechanisms of social construction can operate internationally? The problem is that the portrayal of constructivism and realism as two diametrically opposed poles ensures the question is not asked. We can then pose it differently: if 'anarchy is what states make of it' then why have states chosen the particular form of hierarchy which they have? The lack of answers to this question is a testimony to the gap between theory and human history that is characteristic of IR constructivism.

⁶² Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 484–5.

⁶³ Reusch, J. and Bateson, G., *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1951).

Alexander Wendt's anarchy

It is perhaps unfortunate that Alexander Wendt has come to represent what, in the minds of many, constructivism stands for in IR. Yet it is worth dwelling on his work because it captures the very essence of the conceptual confusion that has been perpetrated under the banner of constructivism. As opposed to Onuf, Wendt is always in the habit of 'building bridges', proposing some unusual synthesis between approaches otherwise thought to be incompatible. These bridges, as we will see, are rather costly, for in the constructivist world, soon enough, no one is truly a non-constructivist. As Jepperson notes, all social investigations are 'constructivist' at heart, and the only difference is the degree of constructivism allowed into their discussion.⁶⁴

Wendt's basic complaint should receive sympathetic hearing. What Wendt seeks to do, correctly in my view, is to problematize the concept of power and interest as it is used in IR. For neither power nor interest are simply 'there'. The way he goes about it, however, confuses the issue. In a scheme adopted, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, by his two co-authors,⁶⁵ Jepperson, Katzenstein and Wendt distinguish between 'Materialists who conceive environments in terms of a distribution of material (military and economic) capabilities' and 'theories depicting environment as containing extensive cultural elements'.⁶⁶ In Jepperson's rendering all social scientific thought is fundamentally constructivist, and hence constructivism as such is not the issue, but only the degree of constructivism allowed into the picture. But Wendt is critical of those who treat 'culture' as a variable and seek to develop an IR theory that rigorously pursues a constructivist perspective. The critical point for Wendt is that 'ideas' are not mere variables but *constitutive* of 'brute material forces'.⁶⁷ What does he mean when he says that ideas constitute material forces? In one interpretation we may speculate that Wendt, in fact, adopts in somewhat confused manner Levi-Strauss's structuralism. Levi-Strauss, it will be remembered, took the view that the characteristics of material entities such as 'raw', 'cooked' 'rotten', are in fact categories of mythic thought, so that, in the words of Anthony Wilden, 'like Kant, he (Levi-Strauss) conceives of being as antecedent to social organization, both epistemologically and ontologically'.⁶⁸ This (Levi-Strauss's), indeed, is an idealist position.⁶⁹

Following in similar vein, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss proposed a hypothesis which has become one of the core tenets of research programmes in the

⁶⁴ Jepperson proposes to differentiate between realism and constructivism according to the degree by which they propose to represent units as socially constructed. In low construction, or realist imagery, 'units may enter into social relations that influence their behavior, but the units themselves are socially pregiven, autochthonous ... Whereas high constructedness denotes that the social objects under investigation are thought to be complex social products, reflecting context-specific rules and interactions', Ronald L. Jepperson, 'Institutions, Institutional Effects, and Institutionalism', in Walter W. Power and Paul J. DiMaggio (eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1991), p. 193.

⁶⁵ Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein, 'Norm, Identity, and Culture in National Security'; they say very explicitly that: 'The map is Wendt's idea', p. 37.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶⁷ Wendt, *Social Theory*.

⁶⁸ Wilden, *Lacan and the Discourse of the Other*, p. 68.

⁶⁹ See for instance Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, pp. 74–5.

sociology of knowledge, namely, that 'the classification of things reproduces the classifications of men'.⁷⁰ A hypothesis to which Mary Douglas asserted its anti-thesis: the social classification of men is often a mirror image of a culture's classification of the natural world.⁷¹ This view is at the heart of those theories that seek to transcend idealist and materialist dichotomy, and they do so by questioning the intuitive, common sense conception of the 'real'.⁷² But there is a subtle and yet all-important difference in formulation. Social philosophers do not say that 'ideas' which, Wendt emphasizes, people 'hold in their heads', have some independence or epistemological and ontological primacy, they say that the object of knowledge can be defined only through the medium of a particular logical and conceptual structure. In other words, 'ideas' do not constitute the 'raw' and the 'cooked', but the 'raw' and 'cooked' are linguistic and hence 'cultural' or inter-subjective categories. The notion that *ideas*, which in Wendt's view are either private or shared notions people hold 'in their head', constitute 'brute material force' is an extreme idealist and indeed voluntarist position which patently contradicts the philosophical realism that Wendt claims to subscribe to. Wendt commits here a categorical confusion, harnessing a legitimate 'constructivist' epistemological argument to support an illegitimate argument privileging ideas *vis-à-vis* power and interest.

The confusion between the ideas and the formation of truth and self in an interactionist order is the critical mistake that allows Wendt to perpetrate a dis-embedded 'constructivist' theory of IR. Not surprisingly, contradictions then pile up, while on the one hand Wendt argues against conventional IR that sees ideas as 'variables' and holds for a constitutive theory of what he calls 'ideas,' it soon becomes clear that he also takes the view that material conditions are in fact independent of ideas. For example, he maintains that 'the structure of any social system ... might consist mostly of material conditions, mostly of ideas, or a balance of both'.⁷³ In other words, ideas are not entirely constitutive of material conditions! On the contrary, ideas belong to a realm that is separate from 'material conditions', and so indeed, to paraphrase Risse-Kappen's famous phrase, ideas do seem to float.⁷⁴ Rather than understand that constructivism problematizes the concept of power and interest as conventionally understood, what we end up with is privileging 'ideas', devoid of human experience, over power and interests as conventionally understood.

Wendt acknowledges that his interpretation of materialism conflicts with Marxist usage.⁷⁵ The 'problem' with Marxism, he says, is that it defines the 'mode of production not only in terms of forces but also in terms of *relations* of production. Forces of production are plausible candidates for being brute material forces. But relations of production are thoroughly ideational phenomena. Which are ultimately shared ideas',⁷⁶ so the problem with Marxism, according to Wendt, is that it is not

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970).

⁷¹ Mirowski, 'Philosophical Bases of Institutional Economics', p. 79.

⁷² For discussion of the constructivist theory of the 'real', see Ronen Palan, 'The Constructivist Underpinnings of the New Political Economy', in Ronen Palan (ed.), *Global Political Economy: Contemporary Theories* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁷³ Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 157.

⁷⁴ Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War', *International Organization*, 48:2 (1994), pp. 185–214.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

materialist at all! Many modern Marxists would agree with some of the above, but rather than retreat towards idealism, their view is that the so-called idealist-materialist dichotomy is flawed.⁷⁷ In fact, Marxism as a historicist theory, seeks to explain why it is that at a particular historical conjuncture, the apparently materialist-hedonistic social culture of capitalism had become dominant. For Marxism capitalist rationality, the advance of the maximizing individual and the profit-oriented activities of the firm are both puzzling as a transitory historical development.

We should ask ourselves, therefore, what is achieved by denying in such a cavalier manner the materialist banner to Marxism—or by ignoring the more sophisticated debates that characterize modern Marxism, and yet recast IR realism, a theory which has its roots in idealist philosophy,⁷⁸ as materialism? In doing so Wendt manages to avoid asking some important ‘materialist’ questions: first, how different societies erect and sustain mechanisms that ensure the appropriation of one human’s labour by another, and second, whether such mechanisms are, as Marx argued, at the heart of human history. But in rephrasing his categories in such a manner and in failing to ask this question, he indeed implicitly provides an answer, that obviously these questions are at the margins of human society and therefore of little interest to IR as well.

How, then, can theories of intersubjective order be applicable to the study of an interstate order? Wendt’s solution is to employ Mead’s theory of the Self as a model for his theory of the state.⁷⁹ Indeed, Wendt goes as far as to suggest that an assumed ‘theoretically productive analogy can be made between individuals and states’.⁸⁰ The state then is a personality, and symbolic interactionism is used as a metaphor. However, at this point Wendt introduces a surprising twist: he proposes to ‘distinguish between the corporate and social constitution of state actors, which parallels the distinction between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ in Mead.’⁸¹ How do we know that that indeed is the case? How do we know that the constitution of state parallels Mead’s distinction between the ‘I’ and ‘me’—a distinction which, of course, has been much debated in psychology as well. The answer is that we do not know, we simply have to accept it as a matter of faith. More remarkably, once we examine the notion of ‘corporate interests’—half of the duality that allegedly makes up the state—we discover that corporate identities ‘provide motivational energy for engaging in action at all and, to that extent, are *prior* to interaction.’⁸² With this ‘minor’ caveat, Wendt in effect departs from constructivism, for obviously if the essential ‘motivational energy’ of state action is ‘prior to interaction’, then the international order is not an interactionist order after all—it is a structural order. But this, apparently, is not a problem because it does ‘not entail self-interest in *my sense*, which is essentially social phenomenon’.⁸³

We end up therefore with the view—perfectly acceptable to all those despised ‘realists’ ‘rationalists’ and even, God forbid, ‘materialists’—namely, ‘how a state

⁷⁷ Wilden, *Lacan and the Discourse of the Other*.

⁷⁸ Palan and Blair, ‘On the Idealist Origins’.

⁷⁹ Alexander Wendt, ‘Collective Identity Formation and the International State’, *American Political Science Review*, 88:2 (1994), p. 393.

⁸⁰ Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It’, p. 397, note 21.

⁸¹ Wendt, ‘Collective Identity Formation’, p. 2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 2, emphasis mine.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 2, emphasis mine.

satisfies its corporate interests depends on how it defines the self in relation to the other, which is a function of social identities [no doubt, broadly conceived] at both domestic and systemic levels of analysis'.⁸⁴ Consequently for reasons that Morgenthau, Waltz and others argued, the 'essence' of international politics is power and interests—these are, to use constructivist language, the 'pre-interactional' structures which are derived directly from the 'corporate identity' of the state. However, the way these interests present themselves is, of course, historically contingent. In other words, it is difficult to discern here a fundamental critique of realism.

Two questions arise from the above. First, why the fascination with symbolic interactionism? And second, why in spite of the self-proclaimed fascination with symbolic interactionism—and at certain crucial moments—do IR constructivists like Wendt retreat into good old realism, represented by key terms such as 'prior to interaction' or 'shared practical knowledge'?

Let us start with the first question. Symbolic interactionism and ethnographic research certainly have a place in sociological research but their ideological value increases dramatically when they are presented as comprehensive theories of social order. We get an inkling of that from Prus who maintains that symbolic interactionism is grounded in the proposition that the agenda of 'the social sciences have as their primary mission the task of attending to the ways in which the human condition manifests itself in the day-to-day work in which people find themselves'.⁸⁵ It is difficult to imagine a definition of the task of the social sciences that precludes any form of social critic to an extent greater than the one suggested by Prus! What is proposed here is a quintessential micro description of behaviour raised to the point of philosophy which is, I am afraid, replicated, without the description alas, in the many strands of constructivism in International Relations.

Prus effectively conflates a methodology with a theory: the need to attend to the interactionist nature of social order and to the fluidity of social truth cannot be equated with the notion that society is an interactionist bubble. The theory is not false, but it is not right either. Just as the general laws of thermodynamics cannot provide us with a full explanation for the formation of clouds, so general theories of interactionist order cannot provide an explanation for the specificity of an *order*, which oddly enough is unequal, repressive, alienating, and strangely, perceived as such by a good deal of the population—and even odder, accepted even by those who perceive it to be unjust. On this point the symbolic interactionists are simply silent. Theirs is a phlegmatic society—a harmonious society based on laws and norms, with no vice, hysteria, cruelty, love; theirs is a theory that has no explanation for these sentiments. Even if we are prepared to accept the view that 'feeling' 'senses' and belief in 'just cause', and membership of the 'nation' are social constructions, why are there variations in social constructions? Why and how does a symbolic interactionist society produce a Caligula, a Nero, a Hitler or an Assad? Why does it produce the Mother Therasas of this world? Why and how has it produced capitalism, feudalism and slavery? When symbolic interactionism—now labelled constructivism—is used as a theory *of* International Relations, it serves therefore as the new 'Cave! Dragon!' exorcizing any form of social critique from the narrative. It

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸⁵ Prus, p. 3.

tells us that while neorealists think that world politics are 'mean and nasty', in fact it is not.⁸⁶ In the context of International Relations, therefore, symbolic interactionism may appear radical whereas it is not.

At the same time, symbolic interactionism poses a serious problem to IR constructivists. As a bottom-up theory, it seeks to explain 'society'—the whole—as an aggregate outcome of intersubjective interaction. The implications are that in each of these outcomes, each state is distinct. But if each state is a distinct and, presumably, constantly changing historical entity, then it is not possible to come up with some broad generalization about the nature of the 'system of states' apart from reasserting again and again its constructivist foundations. From such a perspective we can only say that a state system is a super-aggregated, ever-changing outcome. But this is something that constructivists find hard to accept. They fall back therefore on some notion of pre-interactional order to explain persistent patterns in international affairs, reducing processes of 'inter-subjectivity' to where they had always been in realist discourse—to the status of epiphenomena.

Nicholas Onuf rules

One cannot but admire the audacity of Nicholas Onuf's project, for Onuf subjectivist presumptions about the constructivist nature of 'reality' are trivial, as indeed they are. Onuf seeks not merely to insert a constructivist interpretation upon existing theoretical constructs but to 'reconstruct' the entire field of International Relations theory.

But Onuf's is the task of Sisyphus, not least because it is difficult to make a case for a constructivist international relations theory. After all, international relations is a form of construction. Indeed, the concept of the nation as an 'actor' and hence the perception of a field of international relations is a product of early nineteenth century European history. But Onuf is aware of these difficulties and unlike the first branch of IR constructivism, Onuf begins his intellectual journey by tackling this problem. He argues that from a constructivist point of view there cannot be a theory of IR: on the contrary, constructivism requires the 'abandonment of International Relations (the discipline as it is) and the possibility of international theory (theory peculiar to International Relations)'.⁸⁷

For Onuf, 'constructivism' serves to rationalize the most unusual strategy of 'reconstituting' IR upon a new transdisciplinary paradigm. Rather than examine the substantive claims of realism, Onuf shifts the burden of his analytical examination to a new plane and opts instead to examine the categorical preconditions that render claims such as anarchy, self-help, etc., credible, even self-evident to participants in social interaction. But whereas conventional critics of realism, in whatever guise they take, rely on the often hidden assumption that they, and only they, possess some superior knowledge of reality, thus unwittingly replicating the realist assumptions, Onuf is careful on this point. His own theory, he says, is equally a form of

⁸⁶ Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim, 'Hierarchy under Anarchy: Informal Empire and the East German State', *International Organization*, 49:4 (1995), p. 692.

⁸⁷ Onuf, *World of Our Making*, p. 27.

construction. Now, how can a constructivist persuade his readers that his constructs are worth more than others?

This appears to be a serious handicap. Claims to knowledge are commonly founded upon two grounds: either they are founded upon some axiomatic, if often unstated assumption about the nature of reality 'out there',⁸⁸ or they are presented in the shape of a hypothesis inviting empirical verification or falsification. In both cases a relationship is established between behaviour, action and theory. Constructivism, however, rejects essentialist assumptions. To escape the problem, Onuf introduces an interesting argument: he suggests that theories are constituted around what Sheldon Wolin calls 'operating paradigm'. 'Operative paradigms are those ensembles of human practices seen by those engaging in or observing them to have a coherence setting them apart from other practices'.⁸⁹ Since the object of study does not exist independently of human belief and perception, whether or not 'operating paradigms' are 'true' or socially constructed is irrelevant. It is sufficient to demonstrate that they are taken to be true at a particular historical conjuncture, for the self construction of reality renders them a reality for those that are involved. So, for example, notwithstanding the 'objective' reality of the nation, the nation had become a social fact because 'nationalism denotes a change in the way in which people thought of themselves and their relationship to existing institutions'.⁹⁰ The validity of the concept of the nation is immaterial, it is enough to demonstrate its universal acceptance and the broad implication of the concept to human behaviour.

From this opening assumption, Onuf reconstructs his theory as follows. He begins by demonstrating that international relations was constituted (at least in the United States) on the basis of an inappropriate 'operating paradigm'. International relations constituted itself as a sub-field of political science, the latter concerned with internal politics, or the relationship between rulers and ruled. The former constituted itself in relations to the latter by the famous deficiency, the lack of formal authority or, as Hedley Bull defined it, anarchy. But such a view can only be sustained if we accept the boundary between the two arenas, which Onuf 'doubts' exists.⁹¹ To that extent, Onuf's original critique derives from the familiar critique of the positivist assumptions upon which modern academic disciplines have emerged.

At this point we already notice that Onuf's constructivism shares very little with Wendt's. Indeed, Onuf's is far more sophisticated and rigorous than what we have come to expect from IR constructivism, and is an entirely different project in scope and ambition. What in effect is attempted here is a theory of IR as a component of a transdisciplinary theory grounded in a transdisciplinary 'operating paradigm.' There are, of course, other possible 'operating paradigms' but of those, Onuf mentions only Marxism which he portrays incorrectly as concerned with 'relations of production'. It is particularly unfortunate that Onuf fails to acknowledge the existence of another transdisciplinary constructivist paradigm centred on evolu-

⁸⁸ Wolin is, in my view, correct, pointing out that even Derrida's deconstruction is founded upon a 'vitalist' axiomatic assumption. See Richard Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁸⁹ Onuf, *World of Our Making*, p. 19.

⁹⁰ Koslowski and Kratochwil, 'Understanding Change in International Politics', p. 223.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

tionary institutionalism.⁹² This is an important oversight because it enforces a notion that 'operating paradigms' are somehow linked to an arena, something that I doubt. We can see the problem when we examine Onuf's alternative operating paradigm, political society.

According to Onuf, 'IR has always constituted a political society, by which 'I mean any social arrangement limiting conduct and distributing privilege'.⁹³ This statement is particularly significant on two counts. First, as I argued above, Onuf makes an appeal to some pre-constructivist reality we all seem to know about; the existence of political society. Second, the concept of political society places the emphasis on cultural, rather than political boundaries. From this, Onuf deduces that the state is a special case of political society and argues that therefore, 'anarchy was never a primal condition'. Onuf is correct, the very notion of an anarchical international system assumes *a priori* the existence of a system. But how does such a system come about in the first place? Onuf's theory has no answer to that. He can only appeal to its existence in the name of a theory that he rejects. The misrepresentation of Marxism is significant as well. Onuf takes the common and, if I may add, superficial view, that the Marxist operative paradigm is about 'relations of production.' In doing so he subsumes Marxism as a branch of liberalism. Marx belonged, of course, to the same tradition of political economy that emphasized that wealth is generated in the production process, but does this sum up Marxism? There are many ways of characterizing Marxism. I accept Pablo Casanova's view that Marxism is essentially a sociology of exploitation. It is a theory that asserts quite clearly and firmly that exploitation is the motive force in human history so that all history is the history of class struggle.⁹⁴ For Marxism, then, there is no real accumulation of 'things', or the accumulation of things: the emancipation of productive capabilities in capitalism is incidental to the central point which is the accumulation of power, subjugation and domination.

What is, in fact, at stake here are theories which derive from foundational propositions concerning the motive forces of human history. Marxism is one; the 'will to power' is another; idealism is yet another again, and each of these broad traditions obtains a different interpretation of the nature of social institutions. For the liberals and empiricists, social investigations are anchored on the concept of human 'needs' which society fulfils, with different configurations of social rules and organizations determining how well or not human needs are fulfilled. For the Marxist, 'needs' is an inappropriate social category: there are only 'desires' which are socially constructed.⁹⁵ Thus liberals are caught, according to Marxism, in commodity fetishism, with the theory of 'desire' forming the crucial link in the broad critical tradition. For Onuf, however, society is about neither. The problem is, therefore, that if there is no foundational motive or energy, we are left with social institutions themselves as the motive forces of history. Rules and rule formation then become the linchpin of Onuf's reconstruction of IR theory.

⁹² John Wilkinson defines an economic evolutionary paradigm: 'Economic activity is socially constructed and maintained and historically determined by individual and collective actions expressed through organisations and institutions. The analysis of economic actors therefore become a collective endeavour of economics, sociology, history, organisation theory and political philosophy', John Wilkinson, 'A New Paradigm for Economic Analysis?' *Economy & Society*, 26:3 (1977), p. 309.

⁹³ Onuf, *World of Our Making*, p. 167.

⁹⁴ Pablo Gonzales Casanova, *Sociología de la explotación* (Mexico: Siglo, 1971).

⁹⁵ On the difference between the concept of need and desire, see Palan, forthcoming.

The notion of foundational theories may appear suspiciously like an ontology. It is not. There is a qualitative difference between the nature of 'being', what Heidegger calls 'Dasein', and what social theorists may ascribe as the principal motive for change in human society. Some scholars ascribe one over-riding principle of change, such as power, exploitation or human transcendence, increasingly, however, social theorists have abandoned such claims and accept a multiplicity of engines of change. Nonetheless, change comes about through human practice, and human practice while motivated by a multiplicity of causes is not aimless. The problem is that a theory of the forces of change, whether unitary, foundational or multiple, is simply absent in Onuf. The forces of change are present in his theory by their absence.

Consequently, in identifying the general properties of political society, Onuf points out two rules: 'one is the pervasive presence of rules which, in guiding, but not determining, human conduct, give it social meaning. Whenever rules have the effect of distributing advantages unequally, the result is rule, which is the second general property of political society'.⁹⁶ How did Onuf reach such a position? After all, he himself says that rules are guiding and not determining human conduct—and in doing so he appears to invite what I would call a foundational theory of social change—he appears to ask what determines human conduct. The centrality of rules in Onuf's work is founded on a misconception. Onuf starts from an important debate opened up by Wittgenstein's theory of language. Since language is rule-bound, the question arises as to what extent rules are a defining feature of social life or, as Bhaskar's puts it, the question is whether 'a rule normally tells us what forms of action are possible (if it is constitutive) or permissible (if it is regulative) ...'.⁹⁷ Bhaskar is asking whether we take rules of language formation as constitutive of social behaviour in the sense that they define what action is possible, or whether we take the view that 'rules', different rules, that is, social rules, conventions, domination, define what is permissible, that is, society is rule-bound. The first level is 'ontological': it is in fact an idealist position 'where all that passes is sucked in and devoured by language'⁹⁸ and it is a radical restatement of Wittgenstein's theory. The second 'realist' position espoused by Bhaskar, is that rules regulate social life and it is a matter of choice whether we obey them or not. The reference to two types of 'rules' can be misleading, for the first rule presumes the second, while the second does not presume the first. In Onuf's discussion of Wittgenstein and radical constructivism in *A World of Our Making*, he appears to reject the first interpretation of rules, and yet, when it comes to responding to Bhaskar, Onuf says that the distinction introduced by Bhaskar is untenable: that rules are both constitutive and regulative. In other words, Onuf conflates the two meanings and does not respond to Bhaskar at all. At the level of the social, he says 'rules' do not only 'regulate' but also define what is 'permissible'. The problem is that both connotations are already contained in Bhaskar's notion of the 'regulative'. In so doing, Onuf retreats basically into an idealist position.

The problem can be discerned with some difficulty in the 'World of Our Making', but in the Republican Legacy it is more explicit. With reference to Giddens' theory

⁹⁶ Onuf, *World of Our Making*, pp. 21–2.

⁹⁷ Bhaskar quoted in Onuf, *World of Our Making*, p. 51.

⁹⁸ 'Introduction', *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, p. 1.

of structuration, Onuf argues, correctly in my view, that Giddens is *ultimately* a methodological individualist. But Onuf argues that while Giddens ‘acknowledges’ the centrality of rule, he fails to recognise that ‘rules have an *ontological* standing appropriate to their dual function [namely as constitutive and regulative]’⁹⁹—constituting agent and structure. In other words, for Onuf rules and rules about rules stand outside history: they possess an ontological standing.

The theory of the ontological standing of rules raises two serious objections. First, the very question reminds us that something is lacking in Onuf’s enterprise: why does a specific form of inequality force itself as the rule at a specific historical juncture? What are the mechanisms that generate different types of life experiences? In other words, are we not simply reinventing the wheel here, restating the normative problem which lies at the heart of Western social philosophy and presenting it as a theory? Secondly, the ontological standing of rules again suggests that social reality is not intersubjective: it is not an emergent ‘reality’ as much as a ‘manifested’ reality, an expression of deep seated structural properties of the rules. It is, in other words, a structuralist theory. And if that is the case, then on what basis can one possibly object to social inequality once it is understood that our society is a specific manifestation of such ‘rule-formation’?

Like many in IR, Onuf appears to confuse post-structuralism with its IR variant—and correctly rejects the latter. Unfortunately, in rejecting the IR variant of post-structuralism and by assuming that it is an equivalent to post-structuralism in the social sciences, Onuf finds himself unable to connect to the very tradition that shares his fundamental assumption. The starting point of post-structuralist research is the notion that ‘what dominates (society) is the practice of language’.¹⁰⁰ Discourse in Anglo-Saxon scholarship is commonly associated with language, but there are many other linguistic and non-linguistic forms of discourse. When Onuf says, ‘constructivism begins with deeds. Deeds done, acts taken, words spoken—These are all that facts are’,¹⁰¹ Onuf does not know it, but he is in fact working with Lacan and Foucault’s notion of discourse. Indeed, replace the Lacanian schemata with Onuf’s rule and the language becomes almost identical. As Bracher notes, for Lacan discourse is “‘a necessary structure that subsists in certain fundamental relations” and thus conditions every speech act and the rest of our behaviour and actions as well.’¹⁰² Consequently, discourse plays ‘formative and transformative roles’.¹⁰³ Lacanian theory then assumes that ‘it is on discourse that every determination of the subject depends’, including thought, affect, enjoyment, meaning, and even one’s identity and sense of being. Meaning, which is in itself, a function of the signifier, has custody of being in general, that is, it determines what is and has being, by defining what it means to be. Specifically it defines human identity—what it means to be human, including sexual identity—what it means to be a man or a woman’.¹⁰⁴ This theory, however, merely defines the basic ‘building blocks’ of human society. It is left to post-structuralist sociology, represented by the work of Foucault and more

⁹⁹ Onuf, *World of Our Making*, p. 440, emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁰ Lacan quoted in Mark Bracher, 1994, ‘On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan’s Theory of the Four Discourses’, in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, p. 239.

¹⁰¹ Onuf, *World of Our Making*, p. 36.

¹⁰² Bracher, ‘On The Psychological and Social Functions of Language’, p. 107, double quotations mark direct quotes from Lacan.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

particularly of Lacanian Marxists such as Deleuze and Guattari and Wilden, to generate a broader theory of capitalism grounded in these assumptions.¹⁰⁵

The subject in discourse

In a provocative study of the nineteenth century literary and social scientific texts, Mark Seltzer describes how a new form of narration, the realist novel, has evolved. The subject of the realist novel, he argues, is the internal genesis and evolution of character in society. Thus, the realist novel, 'through techniques of narrative surveillance, organic continuity, and deterministic progress, secures the intelligibility and supervision of individuals in an evolutionary and genetic narration'.¹⁰⁶ The realist novel evolved techniques of narration that produced 'the generalised capacity of "combining together" dissimilar powers and subjects, drawing into relation and into equivalence "distant" orders of things such as bodies, capital, and artefact: this logic of equivalence is the "classic" logic of the market and the market culture'.¹⁰⁷

While remaining agnostic as to the theoretical purchase of realism, once such literary criticism is accepted, then a 'realist(s)' narration loses its epistemological standing and is seen as an emergent constructivist version of truth-telling (or a modern myth) owing its success to the rise of a particular technique of narration. Seltzer, like many others, also points out that such 'myths' do not float in the air but are intimately linked to market logic and market culture and the realist narration. Like many skilful users of discourse analysis, Seltzer is not suggesting a simple base-superstructure model, as much as a dialectical and evolutionary model of change in which practice, which is not separated from reflection but is seen as a mode of reflection, reflects on itself and produces change in practice. This is a reflexive, rather than what now goes for a constructivist, theory.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this article, IR constructivism draws on similar social theory, but instead of digging deeper into the relationship between practice, theory and institutional behaviour and problematizing the relationship between thought and human practice, IR constructivism has become a vehicle for the introduction of a highly dubious 'idealist' perspective on the international. In doing so, constructivism has not only done a disservice to IR theory, but also to the great potential for constructivist thought in IR.

¹⁰⁵ See in particular, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1984); Wilden, *Lacan and the Discourse of the Other*.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 43.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.